

5054012 4th Man Who
Kept the Secrets

The CIA asset: Doing the job

THERE'S A WORD that keeps cropping up in CIA parlance, often used instead of "people." The word is *assets*. As in: What assets do we have in Guatemala (Cuba) (Chile) (Laos) (Leningrad) (Paris) (Stratford-on-Avon)?

"But it doesn't mean just human beings," said Thomas Powers. "It's a category of things, shorthand for anything they could use: newspapers, newspapermen, student organizations, a bug in a hotel room somewhere, diplomatic activity, a research assistant in some medical department."

Or an entire army?

"Yeah, sure," said Tom Powers. "They'd probably have been smarter through the years if they'd listed a few liabilities."

Actually Powers acquired a considerable amount of respect for The Agency during the three recent years he worked on *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA*, a book that's being hailed as the best and in some ways the scariest to date on that whole curious area of American endeavor.

"My impression," its author said, "is that the CIA is pretty intelligent and capable. I did not walk away with the feeling they were clowns."

Or gumshoes? What about the Bay of Pigs?

"The CIA doesn't make policy," said Powers. "It tries to do what it's told to do. In the Bay of Pigs it was undertaking something that couldn't be done. Placing a force of 1500 — on an isolated beach — against an army of 200,000. Completely nuts. So the problem wasn't gumshoes. It was the plan."

In Chapter 7 of *Secrets* we learn of the two anonymities — a Marine colonel and a CIA aide — who toward the end of the Eisenhower era in fact worked up the Bay of Pigs for then deputy director Richard Bissell.

Former newspaperman Tom Powers clenched a fist of satisfaction as he said: "Two names



Post photo by Richard Gummere

Thomas Powers: Sorting out the revolutions.

BOOKS

by the way revealed to the world for the first time by my book. Which is crazy in itself — that for 20 years, nobody knew."

Powers is now convinced that a newspaper he worked on in Italy, the *Rome Daily American*, was a CIA asset, though at the time all he noticed was its fake circulation figures, its scanty local coverage, its "nuttilly right-wing editorials."

Still, he'd had a worldwide scoop in the *Rome Daily American* on the day on which he and his wife Candace woke up in Athens, Greece, to find it an "absolutely silent and eerie city." When they reached Constitution Square and saw the soldiers and tanks, they knew what had happened: the Colonels' had taken over the country.

Powers will be 39 this coming Wednesday. He grew up in Pelham, the son of Joshua Bryant Powers, a UPI man turned publishers' representative for Latin America. From Tabor Academy and Yale and the Army ("in Georgia as a radio operator — real boring") the younger Powers went to Rome for two years, briefly to London, then back here in late 1967 to go to work himself on general assignment for UPI.

"I was their resident student-revolution specialist. Must have covered 50 demonstrations — big ones. Sniffed a

lot of tear gas, just like a lot of journalists did then.

"Never thought of myself as radical. I'd be very hard put to describe to you what my politics are, or were. But I certainly felt every call to revolution was personally addressed to me, and that I had to stand up and answer. Later I had to sort all that out, which is why I ended up writing two books about it."

The two books are *The War at Home* and *Diana: Making of a Terrorist*, on the Diana Oughton who blew herself up in that town house down in the Village on 11th Street. It's one block away from the house in which Powers and his wife and their three little girls live today — "the house my wife arrived at as an infant, and grew up in." Candace Powers teaches school on the Lower East Side. She's the daughter of the late J. G. L. Molloy, once counsel to Fiorello LaGuardia.

So what about Richard Helms, who seems to emerge from the pages of *The Man Who Kept the Secrets* (Knopf) as an enormous blank, or, as John le Carre puts it, a "banality in depth"?

Powers does not agree.

"Helms is not a banal man. He's a prosaic figure. An intelligence bureaucrat. Not an adventurer [arch-rival Bissell was the adventurer]. Not an *eminence grise*. Just a good administrator, a guy trying to run this enormous agency and keep it out of the press, out of trouble, out of conflict with other intelligence agencies, out of warfare with the White House."

Then came Watergate. Now comes Iran.

"I'm sure Richard Helms had no inkling into the ferment in Iran during his whole tenure as Ambassador there, no knowledge that the Shah was about to fall until he fell."

"Helms's whole career and life was as an intelligence administrator. Nobody ever asked him to go out into the streets of Nicaragua to find out what's going on. Nor would he have done it. I think he'd have chosen another line of work."

Powers had three interviews with Helms, and a fourth one after Helms had had a chance to look over the manuscript. What had Helms said then? "He said that the Cadillac he had acquired in 1952 was inherited from his father, and it wasn't gray, it was beige."

— JERRY TALLMER